

ラブライブ!

School idol diary

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Chapter 1: The Red Rose of the Recital

When I was a child, I loved the piano more than anything else in the world.

When my mother took me to the lesson room for the first time, and the grand piano rang out as I touched it, That moment when the reverberations went through me... I still remember how it shot through my tiny body. The rest of my memories from that time are foggy, but that's my one little memory of summer, when I'd just started kindergarten.

Gently lifting the glistening black cover of the piano, I saw the white keys appear before me. Smooth and shining, they felt heavier than I'd expected. Somehow, they felt incredibly... expensive. I felt like I was handling a wonder of the world. This had to be made for a queen or something. Such was the wonder I felt that day.

That's why I could hardly believe that the old upright piano we always had covered in our house, or the keyboard we used for sing-alongs at kindergarten, always kept in the corner and piled up with books and toys like a storage cabinet, could be the same type of instrument. In fact, it was quite a while before I figured that out.



I guess it was just so imposing that my child self thought it was special. That great black grand piano from the lesson room, glowing in the summer sun, made such divine sounds. Even Bayer and Burgmüller's simplest pieces sounded like songs directly from the heavens.

When the door to the waiting room opened, and my ears caught that sound, I lost myself, mesmerized by its beauty. It didn't take long for me to realize just how much I loved music. But, neither did it take long for me to realize the music I loved so much could never be my lifelong dream.

♡♡♡♡♡

I, Maki Nishikino, am the only daughter from the Nishikino General Hospital next to Ochanomizu Station. Not that I'm bragging about it or anything. It's just that if I don't say it upfront, it'll come up in the conversation sooner or later.



"Wow, your dad's a doctor!?"

"Oh my gosh, you must be so rich!"

"Why'd you have to keep that a secret? A girl like you from such a big hospital's, like, on a totally different level from us"

And so on, and so forth. That's how it's always happened since I was a kid.

Hey, I wasn't exactly trying to keep it a secret, okay!?

But, I'm not sure how to describe it, but... afterwards, even I could tell that they'd start to look at me differently.

Those girls, who'd come to knock on my door with a smile on my face and without a care in the world just a day ago, would suddenly become hesitant, and before I realized it, they'd start to look away from me all the time, at someone else.

It wasn't like our friendship would turn sour, or like they would try to push me away, but something would change. Though we'd always smile at each other, there was a sort of force field between us because I was so different. An invisible brand.

And, sometime, I'm not sure when, I became Maki the class rep.

Organized, smart, beautiful, always dressed cutely, super-rich. That's what everyone said about me.

Well, that's just the truth, so it didn't bother me much. But, in truth...

In truth, I wanted to be like everyone else, to be the other side of me. To be the Maki who just likes to play piano. But, in summer, when I was in first grade, I found out that that would never happen.

♡♡♡♡♡

One day, I had a piano recital.

My parents had found a place for me to take piano classes, as a lady of the Nishikino Hospital should. Even back then, the Ochanomizu Concert Hall was a grand, trendy place, so the fact that they were borrowing it to hold a recital was kind of a big deal.

I'd only been playing the piano for a bit over three years. Only certain students selected from the class, many of whom wanted to attend music colleges or become pro pianists, were able to take part, so just the fact that I was selected filled me with pride and joy.

After all, being still in first grade, my hands were too small to play any complicated pieces, and the fifth and sixth grade girls there were so big to me that I had to look up at them. Simply being able to stand on stage with them was like a dream to me. And so, when I excitedly reported this to my mom, she was happy enough to take time out of her busy schedule and take me to pick out recital clothes the next day.

We went to an old department store in Ginza and bought a long dress, covered in frills and so white it seemed unreal, almost like a wedding dress, and a lace ribbon with a rose attached, to tie up my hair.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, I look like a fairy tale princess!"

Looking at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but scream out loud. And, for some reason, I remember Mom happily watching over me, laughing, "you look so cute."

Mom was proper, intelligent, elegant, ladylike, and always strict to me. And suddenly, the same Mom who'd always tell me not to make a fuss, so that I wouldn't be an embarrassment to Dad, seemed kind and loving to me.

Because she was so strangely happy. I'd been proud to have a mom so beautiful and refined, but now that I think about it, Mom was always busy helping Dad at the hospital, and she always seemed tense, and like she didn't have much time to spare. So, my younger self wondered why Mom never had a gentle look on her face like other kids' moms.

It made me happy knowing that when I was playing the piano, she'd dote on me and call me cute, like other moms did.



Now that I think back on it... that was so stupid of me, wasn't it? It's definitely not that Mom and Dad liked seeing me play the piano, but just proof that they never expected me to be any good at it.

Neither Mom nor Dad cared at all about the piano. They smiled exactly because they thought of it as a temporary source of entertainment.

But, my stupid self didn't realize that at all back then.

And so, on the day of the recital,

when our housekeeper, Ms. Waki, told me that Mom and Dad had to go to some party for work, I innocently thought, *aw, that's too bad. I'm sure Mom really wishes she could come, but that just means I've gotta try even harder for her sake!*

"Do I look cute? Does anything look weird? Do you think we should take a picture for Mom and Dad?"

Ms. Waki checked me over several times.

Even in those days, I was very competitive, and everyone, myself included, knew it. Deep down, I thought to myself, *what would they do if I, the littlest kid here, win the primary school division? I'm sure Mom and Dad are gonna be so surprised, and then they're gonna praise me lots and lots!*

And then, maybe, they'd regret missing my recital, thinking Oh, if only we'd come to see Maki's recital instead! That's so much more important than any job!

My imagination started to make my heart race.

And so, after the recital,

On my way home with Ms. Waki,

I was so excited I felt like my heart could burst.

I was happy, so happy. I started skipping without realizing it.

I was so happy, so fulfilled, I felt like I was on top of the entire world.

On my chest was an ornament in the form of a small bouquet of red roses.

Beneath that bouquet was a ribbon bearing the following words:

"Piano - Primary Division: 2nd Place". Being able to read those characters at my age made me pretty proud too.

"This is so cool! There were all those big kids in 6th grade, and I still got 2nd place! Aren't I awesome!? Mom and Dad are gonna be so surprised!"

I hopped. The compliments everyone gathered around to heap on me under the spotlight, after the award ceremony, whirled and danced around in my head.

You're so skilled, I can't believe you're still a first grader, you have so much musical talent I can't believe you're in elementary school, even your outfit is as gorgeous as any pro's...

And, more than anything,

The sensation of performing on that gigantic stage in that gigantic hall, all by myself, was still lingering throughout my body.

I couldn't help but be excited.

Music was so amazing. I just love piano so much!

I hopped again, and with a smile, patted my second-place ribbon, like my own personal treasure. I didn't even realize the hint of sadness in Ms. Waki's eyes as she watched me.

I wholeheartedly believed that when they came home, Mom and Dad would pat me on the head, and tell me, "Maki, you're so amazing! Getting second place while you're still in first grade? That's our girl!" and hug me...

But,

"Aw, you didn't get first!?"

Dad's words as I welcomed him home that night were enough to freeze me over.

As I stood dumbstruck, Mom then said to me, "That's too bad, but you're still the smartest girl in your school. That's far better than just being able to play the piano"

Her words hammered into me like a wedge.

"That's right. It doesn't matter if you can't play the piano, as long as you study hard..."

And then Dad started talking about how my test at cram school made it through the national qualifiers as if it were a perfectly natural thing to do.

I'd already heard about that like a million times.

Without realizing how pale my face had become, Dad, looking like he was a little bit drunk, smiled and patted my head with his large hand.

"Your grades are so amazing, Maki. Keep it up and one day you'll be the most famous doctor at the Nishikino Hospital"

Yp.

Smiling like I was about to cry, I looked up at Dad, and gripped the red rose bouquet tightly in my hand

As I put strength into my hand, the bouquet crumpled with a dry crunch.

Then, I realized something.

Something to survive in this household.

Something to keep me from getting hurt any further

I'm so smart that my parents recognize me for it, after all.

I realized that I couldn't say that I liked music, or that I wanted to be a pianist when I grew up, just like the older girls from my piano classes. Of course, in my kindergarten yearbook, I wrote down "I want to become a doctor" as my dream for the future.

In the end, I stopped having to take piano classes anymore after starting middle school.

Even now, I wonder every once in a while, what would have happened if I'd continued playing piano? Would I have continued won the classic path? If I weren't in a doctoring family, if I never had to worry about succession, what would have happened? Would piano be my entire life right now, as I practiced to test into a music college? Or would second-place-tier skill just not be good enough, leaving me to give up and remain as Maki the class rep, the girl whose grades are her only merit, like Dad says?



In either case, would I no longer exist?

On that day, when I met Honoka,

And met μ's,

When I got forced to go to my first practice session, when I wrote my first idol song, despite never having heard one before, and when I got pulled into timidly imitating everyone else's dancing, swinging my hand here, stepping over here, with my heart beating painfully all the while.

And when I discovered a dazzling radiance that I'd never imagined before.

My high school life should have been spent doing nothing but studying, just doing as Dad said, blindly following his instructions. Everything been turned on its head, and now it shines before me, like the brilliant summer sea.



I'd never felt this before. This throbbing in my chest. This enjoyment. And, I can't stop now. After meeting μ's, I've discovered how important it is to choose for myself what I like doing. That's why, though the me who's discovered that still wonders what would have happened if I'd kept playing the piano, if I really did keep playing, then the me that's a member of μ's would never exist.

A swirl of what-ifs and maybes.

I still have the rose bouquet; I fixed it up and put it on the stuffed bunny in my bedroom.

And even now, when I look at the second-place ribbon, laugh, thinking of how that kinda reflects who I am. I think that maybe if I'd gotten first place, then Dad would have praised me, but that's definitely where I'm the most lacking.

I'm so weak that I couldn't tell him that I loved playing the piano, and wanted to keep playing it even though I got second. I was so indoctrinated the values of being an honors student that I was too scared to take the riskier path and express how I really felt. Afraid of embarrassing myself, afraid of challenging myself. How shameful I am.

That's why I truly think that μ's are so impressive.

The way that getting low test scores and worst-case situations don't bother them at all.

They always stare at nothing but what they want to do, never leaving a safe margin when they act.

They're a world apart from me, always wondering about my exam scores even while practicing with μ's. Hehe.

Nothing but Otonoki.

Nothing but Idols.

It might be a bit strange that someone like me's mixing with those sorts of members, but this place has taught me a lot. This is a special stage that my music has brought to me.

So, I may be immature, but please, give me a little more time, because, I'll do my best so that I can catch up to you all.

I'm getting a little bit sentimental today. I wonder why?

Is it because I've started playing the piano again after so long?

Playing so I can compose new songs for μ's

My love for it is the one thing that hasn't changed all these years

Comments♥Honoka

Maki's the only daughter from the famous Nishikino General Hospital. She's gotta be under so much pressure that a girl from a manjuu-selling family like me wouldn't even be able to imagine it! She's got my respect for the way she always works so hard! I hope she'll get to play the piano again someday. But, when I think about how μ's has their original songs only because of Maki's practice with the piano, I really feel like there's some strange fate at work. She's been heading down this path for a long time! Let's keep on working together ♥



Chapter 2: My First Rebellious Phase



GONG.

My head is ringing like a temple bell.

I still can't believe this is really happening.

Just what is this number I'm looking at?

68 points...

That's the first time this has happened in my life.

But it's true that I've got a lot less time to study since I joined μ's, and even when I do have time, I'm so tired that I don't really feel like studying, and my mind wanders away from studying and towards our dance moves... so I haven't really been studying.

Still, I've never had my grades tank that hard before. I thought that I could afford to take some time off every once in a while.

Maybe I really have lost my focus after all? But, even so...

I start staring, and sigh.

My status as an honors student... is more precarious than I thought.

On that day, we got our English quizzes back.

When my turn came up, the teacher looked back and forth between the name and the score several times with a puzzled look on his face.

"Miss Nishikino, did you catch a cold? Studying too hard's bad for your health. Try to keep yourself in check," she went as she handed me my test with an apologetic smile.

What's this about? I thought, but a shocking sight greeted me as I unfolded the paper.

It's true that I wasn't too confident about it, but I didn't expect it to be this bad.

I felt a pang of self-pity. Sure, it's possible in theory, but I never thought that real people could actually get test scores like these... but it happened to me. Why did it have to be me? I thought. But of course, I was in shock.

A severe shock, as I shambled home and plopped myself down onto the sofa in the living room. Honestly, I'm not too sure how I got home in the first place.

It's so scary when your grades drop.

But, bad things never come alone, do they?

Concerned, Ms. Waki brought me some cream puffs and fresh milk tea, and while I was still in a daze... my senses came back to me little by little, and I looked over the test sheet.

"Ugh, none of the vocab stuck with me, did it? Even though we got new material to read just the other day... I guess I underestimated it," I muttered as I ate another cream puff in one bite... and then,

The door creaked open.

And standing there was Dad, having come home early for once.

"Oh, is that a quiz? Let's see if you're still keeping up with your studies in high school," he said as he approached me, unable to speak with the cream puff still in my mouth, and took the quiz sheet.

"Ah."

With that vocalization, my cream puff fell onto the floor

Immediately, Dad raised his eyebrows, and his voice grew grim.

"Hm? What's going on here?"

He looked again and again at the red number 68 and the my name written on the sheet, as if he couldn't believe what he was looking at.

Ooh, just like my teacher, I thought.

"What's the meaning of this!?"

And then the thunder struck.

As I flinched, he continued, "You're really starting to slip, getting a score like this on a quiz at Otonoki! The reason I sent you to Otonoki in the first place was because I thought you'd need some local connections once you started managing the hospital, and because it would strengthen my ties with the local councilman working in education if you did well."

Listening to his tedious lecture, with his face turning redder with each word, started to make me angry.

"What the hell?" I whispered reflexively.

Managing the hospital? The local councilman? So I'm just a pawn to advance Dad's own lot in life?

"Don't speak to your father like that! You were such a good girl up until middle school, but from what Ms. Waki tells me, you've started to run about even when you don't have cram school, like some young hooligan. And you've even got this awful test score! Don't you feel ashamed of yourself!? If I'd known this would happen, I wouldn't have sent you to Otonoki. I'm sure those foul-mouthed kids there were a bad influence-"

That's where I stopped listening.

What the hell? What the hell, what the hell, what the hell!?

I can't take this anymore. He's really pissing me off!

"What the hell!? My friends have nothing to do with this! I went, 'what the hell' because you were pissing me off! Seriously, what the hell!? I never wanted to go to some local public school like Otonoki anyway! You're the one who made me do it!"



Dad was struck speechless by my outburst.

"I never knew. So this is what you meant when you said I needed to go to a local school if I were to inherit the hospital? It's all so you can build your connections. What a load of crap. And I went with it, hook, line, and sinker. You've never understood how I feel!" It's so obvious that getting a score like this makes me feel..."

The worst of all.... Waaaaah!

I just barely resist the urge to cry, and bite my lip.

Turning around, I pick up the cream puff I dropped and wordlessly exit the room. As I pass Dad by, I get a momentary glance at his face.

Just for a moment, I see Dad with a certain expression for the first time in my life. That of stunned silence.

Hehe♥ I'm sure the look I had when I got 68 points for the first time in my life was nothing compared to that.

Oh, come to think of it, that's the first time in my life that I've yelled at Dad like that, too.

So, I'm sure it must have come as a real surprise to him.

At the fact that his daughter, who used to write "I want to be a doctor when I grow up" as her wish on Yuugata, would wave a banner of rebellion against her dad.

After I went back to my room, I surprisingly felt a bit relieved, even though I'd been so depressed about my test score up until then.

Is this what they mean by blowing off steam?

Still, it might be good to scream like that every now and then.

As for dad... Well, who cares about him?

I mean, he always runs the house like he's the only one living here. It's only natural that his daughter should rebel against him. Seriously, he's really got some nerve, talking about Otonoki like that and treating my friends like thugs! Don't blame me if I start picking up your socks with disposable chopsticks in the future! Though I'm still mad, I amuse myself by correcting my test. Ugh, looks like most of my mistakes were on spelling. Next time I'll show them who's boss and get 100%!

Once I'm done, I still have a bit of time left,

So I decide to turn on my PC and watch one of μ's's music videos.

Did you know? Even when I'm feeling down, I start feeling better whenever I watch μ's dancing with all we've got in our music videos.

We're still not very good, and there's some parts that I wish we could fix, and there are a lot of parts that are so embarrassing that I want to cover my face in shame, but watching them always cheers me up.

I'm gonna work harder. I'm gonna work so much harder at everything I do.

That's how it makes me feel.

Maybe that's the thing that really gives me energy.

Just watching them makes me feel like I'm unstoppable.

Maybe Honoka's feelings, everyone's feelings are coming through to me.

Even though it's just a music video of cute, smiling school idols playing on my screen, hehe♥ But still, I wonder why, even though our school's gonna shut down, even though we don't have anyone wanting to join, and even though nobody came to see our first show,

Even so, the drive to keep doing our best, no matter what, can make us shine like this. No matter how unskilled and inexperienced we are, and even though we have to make everything ourselves since we don't have any budget, and we're total amateurs with no professional training or anything,

Regardless, it makes me sincerely think the sight of people facing forward and doing their best is so beautiful.

I wonder if Dad knows about this radiance that studying alone won't ever bring you.

Oh no, for some reason, just watching it is making me want to dance.

Just a little bit, maybe♥ There probably was a little knock on my door as I stood up. But, with the headphones on, I didn't notice it at all. As I do a step, I sense someone behind me.

And turning around, I see...

"D-Dad!?"

Panicking, I pull off my headphones and try to close the computer, but it's too late

"Was that you dancing on the screen!?"

Dad's face...

It's a lot redder than it was earlier.

"I-it's not what you think, I, uh..."

What do I do? The fear makes my mind go blank.

Are my parents really gonna find out about this?

Aaaahhh, seriously, what do I do!?

♥♥♥♥♥♥



The next day, as I look in the mirror, I see swelling around my eyes.

"Ugh, how pathetic. Anyone can tell at a glance that I've been crying"

I sigh, and try to rub it away, but nothing changes.

I skipped breakfast, thinking I'd go on a hunger strike or something, but I actually don't feel hungry at all. I guess that works out. Strange, huh? I've been feeling hungrier than usual due to all the practice with μ's,

though that change to my schedule was also why my parents started to suspect I was up to something.

That's just great. Now that they've found out, I don't have any appetite these butterflies in my stomach.

Hilarious. Ha ha.

I try to laugh, but...

I can't. There's a lump in my throat.

I really won't be able to stay with μ's anymore. The thought of that dredges up something deep inside of me, and I feel like I'm about to cry.

Flustered, I look up at the ceiling, trying to hold in the tears. I can't cry here... It's just going to make my eyes redder.

I grab my school bag, and walk out the door before anyone else finds me. For the time being, it'll be better for me if I stay out of the house.

Yesterday, after that incident... Dad looked like a demon trembling with rage. It seems that after seeing that music video, he'd more or less figured out what his daughter was up to. Of course, I tried to explain, but He wouldn't listen at all "Quit that right away!" he bellowed. I'd been at fault for keeping it a secret from him, and we'd just fought over my quiz scores, so I couldn't really say I was in the right. There's nothing I can say against the fact that my grades dropped because I'd been busy doing activities with μ's. Besides, he's not really the type of guy who'd get what school idols are about, is he?

That's right. That's why I kept it a secret.

If I'd thought my parents would understand, I'd of course have told them.

But even someone as beloved by the world as the piano is something they think is unnecessary in my life.

But there's not a chance they would understand.

School idols, my desire to stop our school from shutting down, my dreams...



And the reason why I joined μ's... there's no way in the world Dad would ever understand.
 Ever since I was a kid, I've lived my entire life following orders from my parents. I didn't even get to choose my own high school. I'd always been the type to speak my mind, and I'd never thought I'd had such a meek personality, so it took me a long time to realize...
 My studying, my grades, my wish to become a doctor, my princess-esque demeanor, I'd like to think I'd been doing what my parents wanted me to do out of my own will.
 But, I realized, when I looked at the rest of μ's,
 I'd long since stopped looking at my own feelings anymore.
 I'd always averted my eyes from myself, and my true emotions, and now I don't even know where I stand anymore. That's why I'd never even thought to talk to my parents about this.
 That's right. Dad was mad at me for participating in such improper activities behind his back, but he was the one who raised me so I'd never be able to tell him about it.
 He's the one who always keeps my thoughts and feelings suppressed, denies them all before I even get a word out, and pretends nothing ever happens.
 But, I still can't say anything.
 I'm... a coward. It's the sign of a coward to blame others.
 As expected, I'm still scared. Scared that Mom and Dad won't accept me anymore, because I've always been their good little Maki.
 That's why I'm gonna cause so much trouble for μ's.
 Sorry, everyone. Of course I'd like to stay with μ's, but I'm sure Dad's gonna keep a close eye on me for now, and I'm not sure I can convince him otherwise.
 Naturally, I'm going to try, but...
 ...
 I don't want to be a dead weight to you all.
 So just leave me and go.
 I'm sure that μ's will keep on shining even without me. I'll be cheering for you.
 And I'll find a way to go see your live show in the summer, at least, if I can...

♡♡♡♡♡♡



Dragging my feet along the ground, I made my way to the practice after school.
 "I'm quitting μ's today"
 What happened after that went exactly as written in Umi's diary. I still get a little embarrassed thinking about how I started crying from panic in front of everyone else. I'd tried to prepare myself to say it, thinking it was better to get it over with sooner rather than later, but when I tried, my voice trembled, shamefully enough.
 Still, I managed to get it out there, and afterwards, cried and tried to pin the blame on Dad, and not myself.
 With all the tears, I had trouble seeing everyone approaching me. Even though I was happy they were trying to comfort me, I stubbornly pushed them away, saying it wasn't something I could do anything about.
 I'm not honest with myself.
 I was looking only at myself...
 But even so, they all came to my house later that day.
 I'll never forget now they convinced Dad.
 Umi, the one who came up with the idea, told me later that she began to worry that having everyone there and making a ruckus would have the opposite effect, but,
 I was so, so happy.
 So happy that thinking back to it now brings tears to my eyes.
 The 8 members of μ's were lined up in my living room.
 When I saw their serious faces, saying, 'Please let us have Maki back,' I learned,

I should have just said it like that.

From the very beginning, that was how I should have talked to Dad.

Not staying silent and hiding it, not going, 'You won't have any right to complain if I keep my grades up, will you?' Not trying to act cool and sarcastic, but just clashing head-on.

Without fear or being hurt, or losing face.

Please.

I don't want to give this up, no matter what.

I'd do anything to be a part of μ 's, so please, let me stay with them.

I should have just said that, sincerely and truthfully.

If you're sincere about it, then your feelings will get across to the person you're talking to.

Even if that person happens to be Dad.

I'd never known that clashing head-on with someone was a way to persuade them. No, I did know, I just couldn't do it.

I've been a cowardly, overly cautious, greedy show-off my entire life. If I can't be number one, then I don't even try.

It was after I joined μ 's that I thought for the first time how boring such a life spent on the defensive, always quitting while I'm ahead really was. My test scores aren't important, but my feelings are. Win or lose, no matter how things end, it's all fine as long as I'm happy with it. That's what I learned from watching Honoka and the others.

My stupid pride doesn't matter at all.

Just throw caution to the wind.

And the textbook definition of that would be... someone like a ball of fire, who never guards herself. Honoka.

And everyone around her gets caught up, and before we know it, we're burning along with her.

That's why I felt that she could do anything, that she was glowing so beautifully.

Although, that applies to all the members, not just Honoka. When I picture the eight of them together in my living room on that day, I feel heat welling up in my eyes.

I truly think that I'm blessed to have such friends.

So, I'll borrow this space here. I'm really gonna write it down after all. Thank you, all of you. I mean it.

That night, Dad said to me, "If you found friends like those... I suppose sending you to Otonokizaka Academy was the right choice."

Of course, he also made me promise to study properly from now on, but I was happy that he acknowledged μ 's, and... I'm proud to have you all as friends.

Thank you all.

I can't say this to your faces, but I'll quietly write it here. I really do love you all ♡

Comments♡Rin

Yaay, yaay, yaay♡♡♡ Maki's confessed her love to me! Hooray♪ Evidence acquired!

Irrefutable evidence! Phew, with how cool and aloof Maki is all the time, I thought she considered me an idiot, but she really does love me after all♡ Kishishishi♪ Still, why'd she and her parents make such a fuss about gettin 68 points!? When I get 68 points, we go out and get cheesy hamburger steak to celebrate☆





Chapter 3: The μ's School Festival Planning Committee

"Phew, there's just nothing like a good AC, is there? ♡"

Hanayo, having finished changing quickly for once, sits down at the back of the room, with the air vent directed at her chest, and opens her mouth wide.

Ah, she must have been waiting to do that.

"Hanayo, you're showing a bit too much skin."

With the first three buttons of her uniform shirt undone, I catch a glimpse of a pink ribbon underneath.

When I point it out, Hanayo apologizes, but it seems she's enjoying the fan a bit too much to move, so she remains slumped in front of the vent, shamelessly exposed as she is.

"Just so you know, I really don't think that dinky little thing's gonna to cool you off that much..."

As I rest my elbows on the table and watch her, even I start to feel sluggish. It's just one of those summer days after practice.

"Hey everyone, you don't have to stop if you're still changing, but just listen to me. There's something we need to discuss. It's about the school festival coming up in fall..." Eli speaks up.

"The school festival!?" come several surprised voices here and there.

Come to think of it, August's ending in another week.

We've gotten through our summer live concert and our training camps, and just when we thought the end was in sight, now the school festival comes up? Where has the time gone?



Eli continues, "μ's is technically registered as a school idol club, and since we have a club room and a budget, we can of course officially participate in the school festival as a formal club.

"Wow, that's awesome! That means that μ's can really get an audience now, right!?"

Honoka claps excitedly.

"Of course! Rather, to be frank, our appearance at the school festival's our big debut, and a perfect chance to show off what we do as a club, and open up doors to further possibilities." Eli says, confidently raising

her chin.

"Ooh, I can show off my cuteness to the entire school!" Nico remarks flippantly.

"So, what I'd like to discuss is, what will we do for the school festival in fall? If you have any good ideas, I'd like to hear them-"

"Here♪"

Kotori raises her hand immediately.

"μ's is a school idol group before anything, so I think a live concert would be good♡ If we can get a slot in the school festival's main stage, I'm sure lots of relatives and other locals will come see us. And, some girls who see us might want to apply for the school too. I also feel like it's really the most μ's-like thing to do..."

Clap clap clap. This time, it's me clapping, on the inside, at least. That's what I wanted to say, too. I guess great minds like Kotori and me think alike, yep♪

There's no arguing with that. I mean, it goes without saying. What we do are live concerts! Is there really anything else?

And... right, as for any extras, maybe we should put a donation box at the stage?

While we're at it, this could be a good time to start a fan club. Want to become our local sponsors in our fight to save Otonoki? Subscribe now for just 1000 yen! We'll provide our supporters with periodical updates and VIP treatment during concerts! or something... Jeez, if we had that much money, we'd be able to another air

conditioner for this muggy room. Oh, if we're doing a concert for the school festival, it might be nice to make a new song for the occasion♪

Another hit single from Makkii the composer! Aw, but if that happened, maybe I'd start getting too much attention. What should I do?

"Aw, that's boring! Rather than that, when you think of school festivals, you think of takoyaki, am I right? I wanna try doing the thing where you flip it round and round! Let's borrow a classroom and sell some takoyaki!" Rin jumps in.

And right when everyone was all smiles, agreeing with Kotori's suggestion. I'd thought that after Eli nodded deeply and written down "Live concert in the auditorium stage", that'd be a sure pick. What's she going off in that direction for?

But, the next moment, Nico stands straight up.

"I'd like to make crepes, then♡ If you make your own crepes, then you can have all you can eat♪ Bananas, chocolate, pudding, mangoes, just stick any toppings you want on there♪ Let's try to expand Nico-nii's lovely crepes all the way to Harajuku! Put down one vote for the crepe stand, okay?"

As Nico clinches it with her Nico-nii pose, Nozomi joins in, "I think a fortune telling booth would be good. Girls really dig fortunes, so it could work better than you'd expect!"

Next, Honoka, with her eyes widened, raises her hands. "Ooh, then I wanna do oden! It's what Akihabara's famous for, and I just can't get enough of that smooth, cold feeling in the summer!"



"Um, I think making riceballs would be a good idea. It's a standard food for these things, after all, and after sporting events, fresh riceballs are what people tend to go for. They're really popular... and I love them myself." Hanayo says, with some hesitation, and finally, even Kotori says, "U-um, then, I already suggested the concert, but I'd like to also request a butler cafe. In particular, I'd like to have our cool Umi as the head butler♡"

With her cheeks flushed, Kotori timidly directs her gaze to... Umi, who's silently stood by the wall this entire time, listening to our conversation with a sullen expression. "A butler cafe, with me as the head butler? But I don't like headgear," she mutters with a perplexed expression. Apparently she doesn't know what a butler cafe's supposed to be.

At last, Eli starts to giggle.

"So, in short, you all want to do your own food stands, is that right?

Immediately, everyone cheers, "Yes, we do!" and, looking slightly shocked, Eli

smiles.

"Well, for better or for worse, Otonokizaka Academy's currently suffering from an unprecedented shortage of students. While the stage is going to be packed, the student council's been having trouble getting enough groups to participate. I'm sure if you want to start a food stand, you'll get approval pretty quick. Oh, but of course, our main activity is our idol work. I'll be filing an entry for a concert at the auditorium's main stage, so get yourselves ready! Are we agreed?

After she looks over all of us, "You too, Maki. Are you fine with this?"

She looks straight at me.

"I-I'm fine as long as we've got the main stage."

I've got no plans to do my own stall anyway, I try to say, as I always do, but I'm drowned out by everyone's cheering.

Well, nothing I can do about that.

It's just a waste of time and energy to try and fight the momentum here. So, for now, I decide to back off to the side and quietly make my vocab flash cards.

♡♡♡♡♡

Idol cafe, idol cafe, idol cafe. The phrase spins around in my head as I walk home, stunned. Still, what did I hit my head on to let that phrase get inside in the first place? Maybe I should dissect Nico's head to find out. As I silently walk home, left with my own thoughts, I hear a voice behind me.

"Maaaaaki!!!! Heeeey!"

A very loud voice. Seriously, we're not in grade school anymore! Turning around, I see Rin, Hanayo, and Kotori.

"Why the long face?" Rin innocently asks me, and I automatically answer back,

"It's nothing. Just, I'm kind of dizzy knowing that we've decided to do something as deathly embarrassing as an idol cafe."

"You are!? Are you sure you'll be okay?"

Hanayo worriedly looks at my face... Ugh, now I can't even say I was just kidding!

"Could I get excused from that? I'll still do my best on stage, and either way, I really don't think food stalls have anything to do with idol activities..."

"You can't! We're not μ's if we're not doing what we can together, so you absolutely have to participate!"

Rin's face grows serious, and a little bit red.

I pick the worst times to be self-conscious.

Kotori takes my hand, and stares straight into my eyes, saying, "You'll be fine, Maki. I've got no doubt in my mind that you'll do great in our idol cafe, so don't worry about a thing. I'll make the cutest, awesomest outfit for you, so do your best! I wanna see your idol maid look just as badly as Umi's elegant head butler look!" Woah, her eyes are shining so hard it's like beams are coming out. H-hey, what I'm trying to say isn't really that I don't have self-confidence...

♡♡♡♡♡

"You greet the customers with, 'welcome back, master.' Here, try it."

"W-w-w-w-welcome back... M... M... Melanogaster...?"

"No, not like that. It's 'master'! Go!"

"M... Ma-Ma-Ma... Master.... ugh"

"You didn't have to cry, but that gets a pass! You're doing good, Maki.

Someone as smart and skilled as you are should get things down in no time. A well-to-do master might fall in love with you at first sight!"

Kotori comforts me as all the shame brings me to the verge of tears.

That can't be true. I can't work at an idol cafe, I can't even say a single greeting, I think. But, I start to feel a little better, thanks to Kotori's strange magic.

"Hey Hanayo, isn't Maki just so cute? Isn't she the best idol maid ever?"



Though I'm not sure when Kotori changed me into the maid dress she was holding, I look down at it, wondering, is that so?

"Yep! You look really cute, Maki! And you also look really dependable! You're the kind of maid I wish I could be! If I were a customer, I'd want you to serve me, so I might just wait until you come by before ordering!"

What the!? These compliments are enough to kill me!

Despite that, I feel excited.

"If you're so nervous about the idol cafe, then we just have to rehearse beforehand" Kotori had said, before bringing me to her home. The living room of



the luxurious upper-floor apartment she led me to was decorated with countless cushions, quilts, and stuffed animals, apparently made by Kotori's hand.

"So this is where the chairwoman lives, huh?" Rin says, her interest piqued as she looks around.

"It's rude to look through other people's homes-"

Kotori shoots me a look as I speak.

"... master♡"

And I force myself to tack that onto the end.

"Very well done ♡"

Kotori rubs my head and- Hey, that tickles♪

"Wow, Maki sure is a fast learner! Her mind's just a cut above the rest of us!"

This time, it's Hanayo. Even her eyes are glittering hard enough to emit beams of light... and I start to get into it, just a little bit.

"Would you like seconds, Master?"

Three voices respond in the affirmative right away.

Drip drip drip.

The warm milk tea I've brewed on this summer day has a little strong bitterness to it, like a desert chai.

An impromptu afternoon high tea. Before I knew it, I got pulled along with the flow of the other three, and got completely into character.

"Keep that up and you'll have no problems with the idol cafe!"

"I think you'll be really popular ♡"

"I'll come be your customer too☆"

"Oh, you can't do that, Rin! I've gotta have you to try on my awesome shorts-pants-type maid uniform! Oh, right, can I take your measurements when we're done?"

"Boo! I wanted to get served some tea!"

This slow conversation gets me relaxed too.

That's right. I was just worried about how embarrassing the idol cafe might be, but with my skills, I can figure out customer service just like that. What will we do? I'm sure I'll be the only one with customers lining up for me tomorrow, I chuckle.

"Okay, Maki! Now rub my shoulders♪ I've been feeling sore since yesterday!" says Rin.

"Oh, then, once you're done, feed me a scone, please♡ and don't forget the cream!" says Kotori

"Ooh, I wanna try too... oh, I'd like you to do my homework with me♪ If you help me out, I'll be sure to get a perfect score!" says Hanayo.

Wh... whaaa? Are idol maids supposed to go that far?

Seeing my suspicious look, Kotori smiles back, "Smile, smile♡ You're gonna be the best idol maid in the world, remember? This, too, is part of your practice♡"

"Huh, uh, okay..."

Before I realized, I was totally into it. And so, on that summer afternoon, I became quite skilled at brewing tea.

Don't miss μ's's plans for the school festival!



[ON IMAGE: School Idol μ's presents

School Idol Cafe

School Festival

In Room 312

Lovely school idol maids will serve you our best sweets and sweet tea

Lots of tasty food to be had♪

Hope to see you there!]

Comments♥Kotori

I'd been thinking it'd be great if we got to do a concert on stage in the main auditorium for the school festival, but to have an idol cafe in the classrooms on top of that is like a dream come true! I'm handling all the outfits for both of those, so look forward to it♪ And with this rare chance, maybe I'll give the idol maid outfits a more adult look♥ Starting with Maki, I'll teach all of them the ins-and-outs of the business♪ Just kidding. Things are gonna be a lot busier once Fall comes around. Let's all do our best!



Chapter 4: The Seven Wonders of Otonoki



"Hey, did you know about the Seven Wonders of Otonoki? Our school's supposedly got some spooky ghost stories of its own, too♥" Nozomi spoke up.

It was when we were changing, after having finished our activities for the day.

Honoka, Umi, and Eli had matters to attend to at home, so they left early, while Kotori said she had to head out to restock on lace for our outfits before the store closed.

So, rarely enough, it was only the three freshmen, Rin, Hanayo, and I, along with Nico and Nozomi.

"With just the five of us, even this tiny room's more than enough," I said as we began to kick back.

And then Nozomi started talking.

Well, maybe Summer and ghost stories go hand-in-hand, but isn't that just too cliché?

So, having no need for this pointless chatter, I did my best to ignore it.

After all, I...

...

F-forget it, it's nothing.

As expected, Rin was all ears, saying she'd like a pretty ghost to possess her sometime, but Hanayo took everything at face value and started getting scared

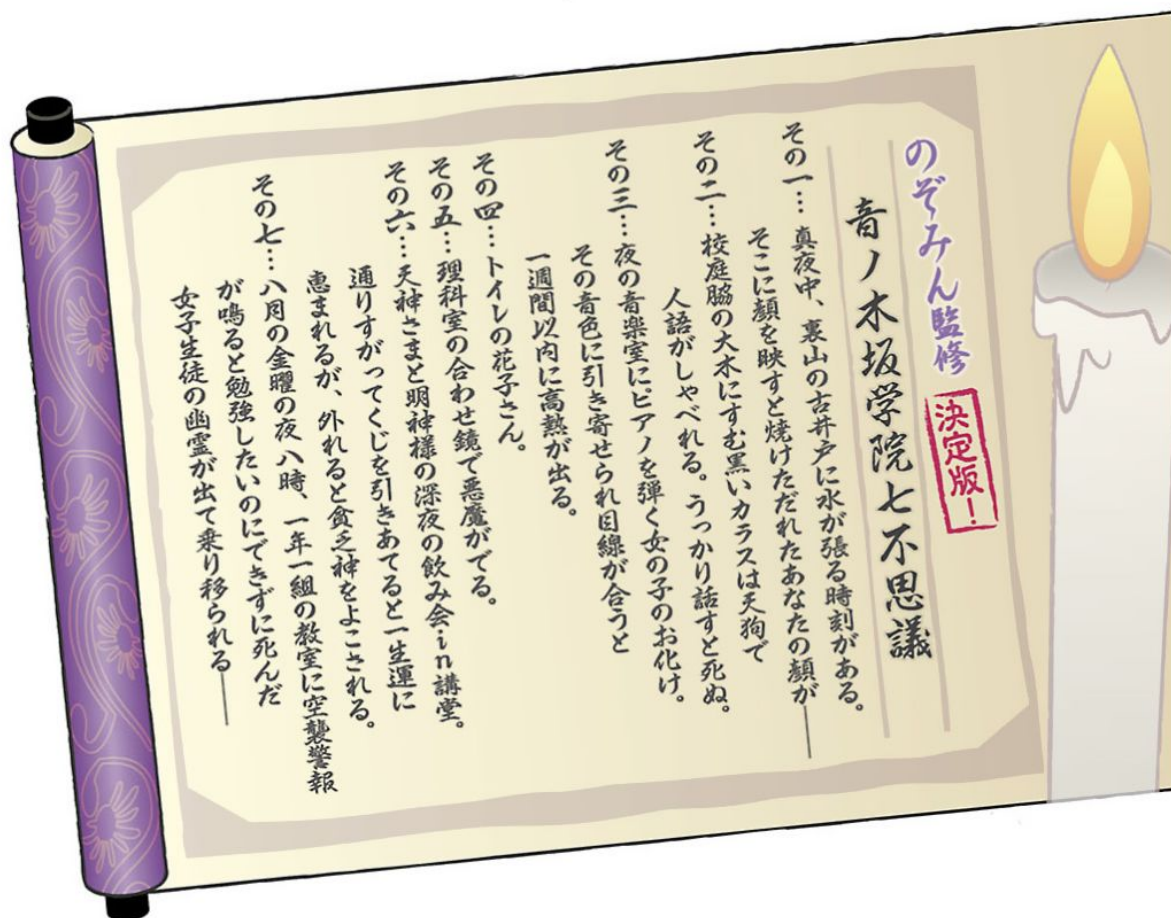


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NOZOMIN'S DEFINITIVE EDITION

The Seven Wonders of Otonokizaka Academy

- 1) At a certain hour in the dead of night, the old well in the hills behind the school fills with water. If you look into it, looking back will be a reflection of your own face, but charred...
- 2) The crow living in the great tree on the side of the school courtyard is a tengu, and speaks human language. Speak to it carelessly and you will die.
- 3) A girl's ghost plays the piano in the music room at night. If you are lured by the sound and make eye contact, you will develop a high fever within the week
- 4) Hanako in the restroom
- 5) You can see a demon in the double mirrors in the science room.
- 6) An assortment of gods drink and party in the auditorium at night. Approach them and you may be blessed with lifelong luck. However, if you are rejected, then the a god of poverty will be drawn to you.
- 7) Friday, 8PM in August, when the air-raid siren sounds, the wraith of a girl who died before she could complete her studies will appear in the Year 1-A classroom and possess anyone who enters

Nozomi seems incredibly pleased at the sight.



"So, in the end, the last girl to see her in the classroom..."

"Eeeeeek!!"

Nozomi watches with joy as Hanayo screams.

Ugh, this is just sick.

She's totally a sadist, isn't she?

Since she's with someone as headstrong as Eli, she gets thought of as the submissive type, but she's actually rather fond of toying with others. Just give me a break already. Though μ 's is a group of cute school idols, it's actually a gathering of weirdos.

Hop hop hop. A pair of red ribbons enter my field of vision with swift movements, like those of a small animal.

"Hey, hey, hey, Nozomin! About that piano-playing ghost in number three..."

She points to the third entry on Nozomi's board.

Oh, there she is. The biggest weirdo of all.

And up until now, she was filing her nails with a look on her face that said, if they're not worth any money, I couldn't care any less about your ghost stories...

"Does this ghostie play her own songs? If she does, then we could get that song from the netherworld, and everyone'll start talking about us once we put it on the net, right?"

Watching her smile as she says so, her catchphrase, "Nico nico nii," comes into my mind. I must have brain problems...

♡♡♡♡♡

"Give me a break! Why do we have to go to the music room to see some ghost who's supposed to show up there!?" I whisper to Nico as I tiptoe through the halls.

"Oh, come on! Don't you wanna meet a ghost!? Besides, even if this ghost does show up and play some awesome tunes, I wouldn't know how to transcribe it♡ You're the only one who can, Maki" Nico eagerly replies at regular speaking volume.

Somehow, I start feeling drained of strength.

So that's why she picked me and not Rin, Hanayo, or Nozomi...

"Quiet down already! The guard's gonna catch us! And either way, forget about that transcribing stuff. A ghost in a music room's just about as cliché as clichés get. In those Seven Wonders of Otonoki that Nozomi brought up, she sounded kind of like she was serious about the ones about Gods or the crow in the garden, but then there's stuff like the demon in the science room that's obviously something she copied down from somewhere else. I'm sure she just stuck it in as padding so she could get seven wonders. The ghost in the music room's one of those fillers too-" I say before I realize how stupid I sound trying to argue about this for real, and calm down.

"Aw, but what would you do if it's really true? I'd do anything to get that song! It's gonna make μ 's huge if we put it on the net! Everyone loves scary stories, so I know it'll get tons of plays. And if it's really all that great, all you gotta do is arrange it and make it into a new song for μ 's♡ Oh, it's sure to be a hit! And then if that song spreads across the world the our ghostie might just be so happy that she ascends to her next life, right? A new song from μ 's, so good that even ghosts love it! I'm sure we'll become super popular!"

... I don't even feel like saying anything anymore.

Sigh. I look around us and...

Over Nico's shoulder, I see the darkened school interior, covered in silence once again.

Before I knew it, we'd made it to the end of the 2nd floor. Our goal, the music room, was only a few steps away.



The bluish-white emergency lights, dotted here and there like fireflies, and the tiny LED keychain in Nico's hand are our only sources of illumination.

"Maki, you'd think the school'd be a bit cooler at night, but it's actually pretty warm, don't you think?" Nico says, having taken notice of the sweat on her back

...

Well, it's August. It's going to be hot.

I-it's definitely not because I'm clinging against Nico's back. At least, I don't think it is. But a question starts to brew in my mind. What's Nico going to say if I keep this up and she finds out how scared I am? I put some distance between us and... Thump. My heart jumps into my throat

Aaah, it's just too scary!

Half a step later,

I'm pressed up against Nico's back again.

"It's getting too hot in here, Maki."

"Yeah, I-I know, but..." I start.

"Fine, I guess I'll cool you down a little♪" Nico says.

All of a sudden, she turns around and points her LED light up from under her chin

"Ooooooh, llllll'm a ghoooooost!"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

For a moment, I didn't realize whose voice that was.



Then, afterwards, there was a moment of silence.

Looking very shocked, Nico quietly says, "Maki... I'm sorry.

A-are you alright?"

Wait, that was m-me!?

"Uhhh, s-sorry, I'm fine. I was just a little surprised..."

In the darkness, I can feel how hot my face is getting.

I screamed... really loud.

"Nico... there's some business that I-" I start to say, but Nico cuts me off

"Oh, you too!? That's perfect! I'd been holding it in for a while too! Let's go together♪ As long as we've got the two of us, Hanako's nothing to be afraid of!"

Aaah, what do I do? My body starts to tremble.

♡♡♡♡♡

"Are you there? Nico, you're in there, right? You'd better not run off without me, you hear?"

"I'm right here, Maki. How am I supposed to sneak past you when you're standing right there?"

I feel a bit of relief hearing Nico's voice coming from the stall.

Being too scared to enter the stall myself, I stand watch by the entrance, but... this is the silent, pitch-black inside of the school.

The cool tile floor of the restroom, and the darkness lurking in the tiny cracks...

No, no, no! I shake my head and... Woah, is someone there!?

I thought there was, but it was just my own shadow reflected in the mirror above the sink

Aw, jeez, I can't take this anymore!

"Nico!" I call out to her again...

And finally, she replies, "Sheesh! Maki, you're too impatient! You can't hurry these things!"

"Sorry..."

I huddle up and wait for Nico, doing my best not to look around me.

"But, uh, Nico..."

"I told you, I'm almost done!"

"Okay..."

As I fidget...

Even I feel like I need to go... No, you can't, Maki!

No matter what. What if Hanako comes out when I enter the stall? I start thinking back to that one scene in Harry Potter. I loved the movies, but that was the one point I got too scared to open my eyes. Still, I just know for sure some insanely scary ghost came out of the toilet. And without magic, I don't stand a chance against any ghost...

Seriously, what do I do? I'm starting to get-

At that moment...

...?

My ears twitch.

It's as if I'm hearing music.

I thought I was hearing things, but no. It's quiet, so much that it's barely audible, but I hear a piano.

A serene, strangely unsettling, and disorienting melody. The sound, reminiscent of Satie's Gymnopédie, permeates every inch of my body...

Is this... is this... possibly...

Nozomi's words play back in my head, "A girl's ghost plays the piano in the music room at night. If you are lured by the sound and make eye contact, then, within the week..."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The next thing I know, I'm screaming at the top of my lungs.

I start to run, with my eyes still shut to drive away everything around me, so I don't see anything. So I don't touch anything. All I do is scream.

"AAAAAAAH!!! Mom! Dad! Someone, save me! I hate ghosts! Hate, hate, hate, hate 'em! No, stay away! Stay away from me!"

So, I don't remember where I went, or how I got there. All I can recall is a voice that came from behind me on my way out..."

"What!? What's going on!? Wait, what's happening, Maki? Wait, no, don't leave me here!"

I get the feeling there was a shivering, incredibly panicked voice back there.

Running blindly, once I reach the sakura tree in the middle of school courtyard, where the lights are still lit, I finally realize something.

"What do I do now? I... I left Nico back there."

I'm scared

I'm really, really scared.

I'm scared of the empty, pitch-black school. Scared of the one-in-a-million chance that one of the ghosts from the seven wonders will come out, and... Scared of leaving Nico in there and running away by myself.

I can't do that. So,

I bite my lips. And then, I head towards the school building and run. Two fears against one. If it were a decision by majority, then my fears of darkness and ghosts would win. But, it's the other that matters.

I know I can't leave Nico in there.

I won't be able to move anymore if I start to think, so my mind goes blank.

I'm scared. All I do is stare at a single point and run for my life. All I do is search for Nico. As I try to enter from the staff entrance closest to the music room, I see her.

A small girl in uniform, cowering on the small concrete staircase at the entrance. Nico's face is wet with the tears dripping down her cheeks.

"Sorry, Nico. Are you-" As I approach her...

"WAAAAAAAAAAHH!! How could you leave me in that scary place all by myself!?" she cries.

"I'm really sorry. It's just, I thought I heard someone playing the piano, and got scared, and then... and either way, you didn't seem like you were scared of no ghosts"

"But- I'm fine if you're with me, but it's totally different if I'm by myself!"

Nico sniffs and looks up at me, and I look down past her skirt, where I see blood coming from a small scrape on her knee.

"I fell..." Nico says with an ashamed look. Automatically, without thinking, I bend down in front of her and gently wipe her wound with my handkerchief.

"How is it? Can you walk?"

Nico gives a sharp, childish nod in response, and I slowly take her by hand to the water fountain to wash off her scrape.

"From the looks of it, nothing got in, so disinfect and put a band-aid on it once you get home and it should be fine." I say, folding my handkerchief back up and wrapping it tightly around the wound. As I smile at Nico, though her face is still wet with tears, she gives a small nod back.

Time to go home! I think, and turn on my heels to walk away, but Nico stays there, not making any sign that she's going to release me. We're still holding hands.

As I try to extract myself, she tightens her grip.

Still looking at the ground in shame, Nico bites her lip, and the red ribbons on her head dance in the wind.

And, I don't know when, but somewhere down the line, I'd totally forgotten how scared I was of the ghosts. And that's even though I'm

normally so bad with haunted houses. Hehe.

Looking at the crying Nico, I start thinking that she's kinda cute, like a little, elementary school girl, and with that, I'm no longer afraid of the darkened school at night or any ghosts. And that... is one of my seven wonders of Otonoki this summer.

Nico was spot-on.

Whether you're alone or with another are two different matters.

Not at all like Nozomi's phony wonders, right?

Comments♥Nozomi

Sheesh, I was waiting in the music room the entire time, but nobody even showed up! Though, in my boredom, I got a bit of piano practice in♪ Sheesh, salvation comes to true believers, right? Makkii should trust me more and live life, or else she's gonna miss out♥ Ghosts really do exist in this world, and Hanako in the restroom ain't no fake, either! Well, I have faith that Makkii will understand that one day. There's still lots more of my seven wonders out there!





Chapter 5: Ride the Bike

Our first long weekend in September was coming up soon after school started.
The Friday right before, I saw a notice in the μ 's club room.



Our next holiday practice
9/16(Holiday) at Hibiya Park
Outdoor practice
Meet: 9:00 AM
End: 3:00 PM or so

Bring:
-Drinks
-Lunch
-Clothes
-Snacks (Pack light) (This means you, Nico!)

Map of Cycling Area
Hibiya Park
Here→
Station↓

"Cycling area, huh...?"

I delicately trace the map with my finger.

"Oh, you don't know about that place, Maki? Right, I guess it is pretty far from Ochanomizu, isn't it? Well, I figured that since we had a long weekend and all, it might be nice to practice at a park. There's probably going to be lots of runners and other onlookers there too. So, it's your first time going there? Maybe we should meet up here at the front gate of the school instead and go together, then?" Eli calls out to me from behind.

"Meet at the front gate, huh...?" I simply repeat after her like an idiot.

"Giggle. I guess it's kinda embarrassing to be meeting up at school before riding our bikes away, like elementary schoolers, but I think we can do that that stuff every once in a while, right? Being able to meet up at school easily like this is one of the perks of going to a local school."

Eli seems to have misunderstood my reaction. Her smiling reply sets my heart racing.
 What should I do...? If I'm going to say it, it's now or never, right? Right.
 But... how should I put it?
 I don't want her to raise a fuss if I'm too sudden, but if I just say it naturally, then it might get glossed over...
 Plus, it's pretty embarrassing.
 Aaagh, what do I do? Um, I... I...
 "Eliiiiiiii!"
 At that moment, Honoka and Umi enter the club room.
 "I just heard from Umi! Are we really all bringing our own lunches and biking all the way to Hibiya park?
 Wow, that sounds fun! It's like we're going cycling!"
 Honoka continues, talking about how she's going to bring manjuu for us all to try, and they'll be so
 surprisingly delicious that we'll put down orders on the spot and-
 Oh, Rin, Hanayo, and Nico have come too.
 "What's this? Says we're going on a trip?"
 "Oh, are we gonna bike all the way to the palace? I like it! I'll show you all my awesome 12-speed bike!"
 "Wow, you've got a 12-speed bike? That's soo manly! Mine's a girls' bike I use when I go shopping. I'm
 pretty proud of its pink body♪"
 And so, they start to get into their bike talk
 "Will I be fine with just my mom's city bike? What should I do? If Everyone goes too fast, I might fall over..."
 Kotori pats the teary-eyed Hanayo on the head and comforts her, "It'll be fine, Hanayo. I'm not so good at
 going fast either. Why don't we go slow together?"
 "Okay♡"
 For some reason, when they're together like this, they share a similar atmosphere that makes them seem
 like sisters.
 Two sisters, always quietly smiling in the sun together.
 They have a softness to them that I lack.
 That's why I wish I could be like them, just a little bit.
 I'm sure that if I were, I'd live an easier, happier life.
 And above all, I'm sure people enjoy watching those sorts of idols more.
 While I'm putting myself down...
 "Okay, meet at the front of the school in two days! It may be September, but it
 still gets hot during the day, so be sure you have something to drink!" Eli
 dismisses our practice with a vigorous clap.



♡♡♡♡♡

What do I do?
 What do I do, what do I do, what do I do...?
 Now that it's come to this, I guess I've got no choice but to skip practice,
 I think to myself as I walk home.
 That's right, would it work if I told them I suddenly caught a cold?
 Nope, no way. μ's is a collection of the world's nosiest busybodies, after all.
 If I said that, there's no doubt they'd come to my house to check up on me right away. Seriously, those girls
 are so thick-headed that I can't even pretend to be sick around them.
 If I told them I wasn't feeling well, they'd take it upon themselves to show up at my door carrying some fruits
 or homemade cakes or fresh manjuu or other ridiculous stuff.

And then there'd be one by my bedside, and then two, and then soon the whole crew would be there. And I'm sure that eventually, they'd start playing around in my room, not caring one bit that I'm supposed to be sick.

Hehe, when I start thinking about that,
I laugh.

Honestly, this is just like some sort of comic, right?

Like, how'd I get such cheerful friends like these? Is this reality? Hehe.

When I think about it, it's kind of strange.

Up until now, whenever I found anything I felt was bothersome, stupid, or uncool, I'd avoided them like the plague.

That's right. When they drew near, I'd pretend to be sick, or something.

But, I'd decided not to do that anymore, right?

We're really not going that far from the school anyway, and since it's supposed to be a practice for μ 's, their formation's gonna be ruined if I'm not there. Give it any thought and it's clear that I can't possibly skip out.

Ugh, but still, I don't wanna.

I'd never thought that this would come back to haunt me now, of all times.

I wish I hadn't skipped practice back when I was in elementary school.

After all, even though I'm telling myself I won't pretend to be sick, I still won't be able to tell the truth to them when the time comes.

The truth that I can't ride a bike.

That'd make me sound so stupid.

Thinking back, when did it first occur to me that I didn't know how to ride a bike?

I think it was back in first grade, maybe?

One day, I was walking down the street when I saw one of the neighbor kids zoomed past me on a bike. I wondered why a little kid like that would ride something so unstable alone, but it didn't really bother me.

I never had a bike when I was in kindergarten, anyway.

My parents were... overprotective, I guess.

They told me it was unsafe and I didn't one, so they didn't buy one for me.

That's why I thought that bikes were something special, reserved for kids who actually wanted to ride one. You know, like unicyles.

First of all, I rode a car to a primary school far away, so I never got a chance to ride a bike out somewhere with the kids in my neighborhood.

Then I got to third grade, and that was when the realization hit me all too late that, oh crap, apparently pretty much everyone knows how to ride a bike.

So I finally got a bike. However, it's a different story if you're a kindergartener, but for someone my age to learn how to ride a bike is just too... shameful. It's like I'm some super unathletic girl or something. So in the end, I couldn't do it.

I mean, during the races at our sports festivals, even if you get 3rd or 4th place, everyone else is too caught up in their own scores that you don't draw much attention. However, a 3rd grader wearing a big biking helmet and swaying this way and that as she medals down the street would stand out way too much. I rode a few circles in our back yard, fell down a few times, and that was the end of that.

Ugh, just thinking about it is starting to make me depressed again... I fall onto my bed and stare up at the white canopy, and in my mind, I see... the smiling faces of the members of μ 's.

Ugh, not good.



I can't start thinking like this.

Unlike my past self, I start to fill up with a proactive aura out of nowhere.

Those girls supported someone as aloof as me.

They said that someone like me was their most important friend in the world. So, for some reason, I feel like I have to do what I can to help them.

Strange. Oh well.

"To tell the truth, I don't know how to ride a bike."

Oh, but before I say that,

I'd rather practice in secret

I don't have much time, since we're practicing at the park in 2 days, though.

But even if I don't figure it out, this is better than nothing.

That's right. At times like these, it's best to "smash it open!" as Honoka would say.

I slip myself out of bed.

I'm not gonna give up!

Before I confess to everyone that I can't ride a bike, I'm gonna practice one last time. When there's a will, there's a way!

Make Maki's dreams come true!!

A miracle's gonna happen, and I'm gonna learn how to ride a bike in one day!



♡♡♡♡♡

"Ow... Ow ow ow ow..."

The next day, I brought out my old-fashioned, large-wheeled bike from the back of the garage. With all the dust it had gathered, just cleaning it off was quite a task in and of itself.

At this point, I can't even tell who owned this old bike.

Did our housekeeper, Ms. Waki, use it for shopping?

The sky-blue bike I abandoned after several attempts in elementary school is still and relatively clean, it's far too small for me by now.

Ugh, when you're struggling in vain, a moment can feel like an eternity. But, now's not the time to be distracting myself with these petty complaints.

"Alright, here I go again."

I pump myself up, and stand in the middle of the neighborhood park, and uh... First, straighten your back, face forward, and calmly take position.

I looked it all up on the net.

Even as an Adult, You Can Learn How to Ride a Bike!

Uh, and now you kick off with all your might, direct your center of gravity forward, don't bend your legs too much, stay calm and maintain your posture even if you start wobbling, and law of inertia will direct your bike forwa-

"Hey! Aaah! Eeeeeek! Time out! Wait! Stop! Aaah, you stupid bike-!" As I scream, the bike crashes to the ground with a loud clatter.

I jumped off just in time to avoid any major injuries, but I did get a little scrape on my knee.

Ugh, how many times does that make it now?

"I should have brought a band-aid."

I mumble to myself, and blow on the cut.

"Maki, you can have this."

Unexpectedly, a response comes immediately from behind.

"Huh? Uh, w-who's there!? Ah, aaahh!!" I bluster.

"Here, a band-aid! I brought some since I wanted to practice a bit too!"

Smiling back timidly, but with a strange glow to her, is.... Hanayo.

Urk. My throat starts to feel tight.

"You... saw that, didn't you?" I ask with a leaden voice.

Ugh, so my secret's out.

With the helmet, the scrape on my knee, and that great crash, you don't have to be a genius to figure out what's going on here, right?

After I'd gone to all this trouble and uncharacteristically decided to go practice so that nobody would find out, too.

No matter how you look at it, I'm a shameful girl who's still practicing how to ride a bike even though she's already in high school.

In the mood for a bit more pain, I continue, "Ahah... well, are you surprised? The truth is, I don't know how to ride a bike. I never needed to, so I never really practiced. And just look at this old thing. This decade-old street bike's just awful, isn't it? Well it's not mine, but I just found this old thing laying around in the house..." And to my desperate excuses, Hanayo replies, "Yep! I saw it all! That was pretty good! I think you've almost got it! I can't believe you almost got it down all on your own, but I guess that's Maki for you!"

That's a pretty naive way of looking at it.

But, it's filled with that Hanayo-esque sincerity to it... Well, in short, it sounds like she really thinks that from the bottom of her heart.

I'm dumbfounded.

"What? I've almost got it? That's Maki for you?" No, that's..."

Hanayo.

My chest tightens for some reason, and I can't talk

Hanayo... How can Hanayo...

... act like this?

That's something I could never do.

But Hanayo can.

To share her kindness and give others confidence.

I fall silent for a moment. And then, I ask her, "Hanayo... when did you learn to ride?"

Hanayo scratches her head and answers with an embarrassed smile, "Eheheh, you see, I learned really late! But, unlike you, I'd been practicing for years and years, but I still couldn't do it, so I had to use training wheels, and it was only until fourth grade that I finally learned... Eek, that's so embarrassing!"

She takes her hands off the handlebars of her bike and puts them against her pink cheeks.

The orange body of her bike matches her well.

"Rin and I go way back, like, we've been friends since we were kids, right? But Rin could ride bikes like an expert even as a kid, and she'd always come by, saying, 'Come along with me!'" and chasing after Rin with my training wheels was such a pain... Did you know? If you go really fast with training wheels, the plastic rubs against the ground and makes this incredible rattling noise that you can hear for miles. It's like an old, broken-down truck. Eventually, people would realize, 'Oh, here comes Hanayo'" just from the sound alone, and they'd point and laugh, calling me "Runaway Truck" Hanayo. And what's more, even with the training wheels, I'd go so fast to keep up with Rin that I'd lose my balance and fall. Hehe. That's just ridiculous, isn't it? How can you fall over even with training wheels?"

Hehe, she's right.

I start to laugh along with her.

That, too is something of hers I could never imitate.



She laughs even when talking about how unbelievably unathletic she is. When I listen to her, for some reason, I start to look up.

Hanayo always illuminates Rin from behind, and hardly ever takes the front.

But when we're together, just the two of us, I remember.

When I was still torn between whether to join μ 's or not, Hanayo was the one who pushed me forward.

And, even though she always seems timid, and always mutters that there's nothing special about her, She does what she wants to do.

She thought that someone as clumsy as herself could never dream of being a school idol, but it was something she wanted to do, so she did her best at it, no matter how embarrassing it was for her.

That's what she declared. Though she didn't say it in words, her eyes spoke for her.

That was how Hanayo was on that day...

When I was struggling and too afraid of appearing lame to tell everyone that I couldn't ride a bike, Hanayo taught me.

Even if there's something you can't do, it's far cooler to admit to yourself that you can't.

Afterwards,

Hanayo watched me practice biking the whole time.

She taught me a secret technique drawn from her years of practice to allow anyone, no matter who, to figure out how to ride a bike.

In short... It's simple once you gain your balance once.

But even knowing that,

Well, gaining your balance in the first place is the issue, I guess. But, saying that I'd understand with some support, Hanayo ran alongside my bike and pushed me from behind.

"Good, wow! You're doing well, Maki! You've already got it! Great! Keep it up! Just stay like that, you can do it! Just a bit more... Wow, you're the best, Maki! That's awesome!"

It's kind of embarrassing for me, though.

But, it makes me happy.

After all, nobody's watched me practice biking before in my life.

Back then, I had no choice but to practice by myself, in secret, in my back yard.

If I weren't alone, then maybe it wouldn't be so embarrassing to practice in the park? To have someone at my back, running with me like this,

To tell me to keep it up,

Would I have learned to ride earlier?

I never knew that having someone with me, pushing me from behind, could be so comforting.

I think to myself, watching the sweat shining on Hanayo's forehead.

And, to make good on these emotions in me,

On that late summer day, the black shadow of my bike gradually stopped swaying.

I'm still unsteady, but I managed to get to the point where I could ride straight across the faded grounds of the park.



♡♡♡♡♡

In the end, how am I going to go to the park for practice tomorrow?

That's still up in the air.

So, stay tuned!

God,

Please, allow me to ride together with everyone tomorrow.

Oh, and I'll write down what Hanayo casually said to me after the end of practice.

"Let's keep the fact that we practiced together today a secret, Maki! Give them all a surprise tomorrow♡"

Uh, Hanayo? If they don't know in the first place that I never learned how to ride a bike, then why would they be surprised?

So, what you're saying doesn't really make sense.

Does she realize that? But still, it makes me happy to receive Hanayo's consideration.

I love that part of Hanayo.

I hope she stays that way forever, as our cute, caring Hanayo.

Comments♡Umi

I had no idea there was such a story behind our practice at the park that day.

It's just like Maki to put in effort behind the scenes.

Still, to confess to it in this diary is also just like her, Hehe. She decided to put it here instead of telling us face-to-face, didn't she? I feel that Maki is a very fair person. "Loyalty, benevolence, and culture form the basis of government," an altruistic spirit is a beautiful one. Maki and Hanayo are so touching♡



Chapter 6: The Way Home



It was just a bit past September, around the time when the sun starts setting earlier and earlier each day. It was at 6:30 PM that I was walking home from practice. Until so recently, it had still been bright at around this time... The autumn days really fly by, don't they?

Yep, I'm pretty well acquainted with those sayings ♪

Brrr, a cool wind blows by, alerting me that it's fall. Ugh, for some reason I'm starting to feel lonely, even though I'd just been playing with the rest of μ's.

Actually, that might be exactly why.

It's weird. Up until now, I'd always walked home alone just fine. It was second nature to me. But now, as I walk home alone, I feel strangely... lonely.

"I wish someone else were here."

I'm taken back by the sound of my own whispering.

S... stop it, what am I saying?

I'm starting to sound like one of those embarrassingly lonely kids.

As I try to get myself together again...

"Maki, Maki, Makiiii!" a loud voice rings out from behind me.

Hehe, I start to giggle. That airheaded, energetic voice couldn't belong to anyone but...

"Rin."

I thought I saw her off in the distance, but she managed to get right up to me in the time it took to turn to her.

"M... Maki... Phew, I managed to catch up... Haah haah..."

Wheezing and panting, Rin stops to catch her breath, and behind her, I see Hanayo trying to catch up, shouting, "W-wait up!"

That's pretty far! Rin sure is a fast runner, huh.

I find myself inadvertently staring at Rin's legs.

Those finely tapered ankles, well-defined calves, and oh, there's a band-aid on her kneecap. Did she hurt herself or something? That must hurt. I almost start to reach my hand out, but I catch myself.

"What'cha lookin' at, Maki?"

"Uh, n-nothing."

Really, it's nothing.

"Th-that aside, what's up? Do you need something?"

Oh, maybe she's going to ask me to eat with her? Now that I think about it, today after practice they'd started talking about something silly like that... Well, fine, I'll play along as long as it doesn't take too much time.

"Well, Makkii, I thought maybe you accidentally took my English notebook with you"

... Oh, is that all?

"Your notebook... is it? Oh right, now that you mention it, our English essay's due tomorrow, isn't it? And you're not telling me you're going to do it tonight, are you? Oh, fine. I'll help you out, if you don't mind" I say as I unzip my bag. The moment I do so, Rin sticks her face in and starts rummaging through.

"Hey, don't mess my stuff up."

"Ah... I finally caught up, haah haah. Hey, Rin, I'm pretty sure you left it in the classroom," Hanayo says with an unsteady voice as she arrives.

"Hmm, you think so? I guess I'll have to run back to get it"

"It's too late for that. Let's just go home now. You can just write your essay on any old sheet of paper."

Hanayo gives her best shot at persuading Rin. I guess anyone would be reluctant to go to school now that it's almost 7. Sympathizing with her, I join in as well.

"I agree. Don't you feel tired after practicing so much? The 2nd semester's only just begun, so I don't think anyone will blame you if you skip some homework to go eat with your friends..." I start, but Rin pumps her right hand in the hair and blows me away.

"No, I've gotta go back! If I forget my homework tomorrow, they'll finally make me skip lunch to do it! If that happens, I'm gonna starve to death!"

"Rin..." Hanayo says without any energy in her voice.

"Now that that's settled, let's hurry!"

With that, Rin latches on to Hanayo's arm.

So... they're really gonna go, huh.

For some reason, I feel a bit let down. N... not that I wanted to eat with them or anything...

No matter, I'll just go home now, then. Those two were only here to check if Rin's notebook was in my bag. That's all. I'm just feeling tired and hungry after all that practice, that's why I was hoping I could eat with them.

Is that it? I don't act right when I'm hungry. It must be because of the short autumn days. That's why I'm feeling a little lonely.

"What are you doing?"

I suddenly realize Rin's staring back at me with a confused look as I wave bye-bye to her.

W-what? I'm not doing anyth-

Taken aback, I look around, but there's no one else here.

"Well then, I'll see you la-" I start.



"Maki, let's get going already!" Rin says as she grabs my arm.

"Wait, going where? You don't mean-"

"You guessed it! We're going to grab my notebook, of course! Let's go!"

I'm going too?

My heart skips a beat.

I get the feeling Rin noticed my downcast expression I'd had the entire time and immediately guessed what I was thinking.

I'm embarrassed... but excited.

Aah, the beating of my heart is so loud I'm worried they'll hear it. What do I do?

I'm embarrassed, but happy. I don't know how to describe it, but I feel so happy.

Can I take your arm?

Can I really come with you?

Oh right, Rin's already grabbed on to my arm, hehe.

As I laugh, Hanayo smiles at me, "Wow, you're coming too, Maki?"

The more the merrier, as they say ♡ I'd been scared of going to school at night after hearing about the Seven Wonders from Nozomi, but..."

Putting on airs, I say, "There's nothing to worry about. Ghosts are just superstition. And besides, it's not night. It's not even 7 yet. We can pick up Rin's notebook and be out in time for dinner-"

"Oh, then once we're done we can all eat together before we go home! Hooray, we're having dinner with Maki tonight!" says Rin. As we go, arm in arm, I feel my heart beating faster and faster.

"Yeah, that sounds great! It's just us first-years together♡" Hanayo says, smiling as she holds on to my other arm. And...

"Yes," is all I can manage to say.

It's really true that you can be so happy that your chest starts to hurt.



Afterwards, the three of us headed off to the school together.

Even though it's night, I know I'll be fine as long as there's someone with me who I want to protect.

So, I'm not scared of ghosts at all. Nothing can stop me today ♡

Comments♡Hanayo

Ta-dah! It's the birth of a new trio in μ's♡ Um, I'd always thought that since Maki's so smart, skilled and always speaks her mind, she'd never want anything to do with me, but she's actually a kind girl who cares for me a whole lot. If she's fine with it... maybe we can walk home together from now on? I'll bet if Maki's with us, even Rin will stop leaving her things behind, too!





Chapter 7: The Reason I Came to Otonokizaka Academy

Back when I was in my third year of junior high...

Right before summer break, the teacher doing my guidance counselling was so terribly surprised.

"Are you sure you want to go to Otonokizaka Academy!? They've been talking about shutting that tiny place down for years now-" she said, before remembering she should hold her tongue. I can still remember the look on her face.

Yeah... even if they're in a different region and ward, under different authorities, they're still both public schools. She'd get in hot water if anyone heard her saying that, yes she would.

Back then, those displeased teachers would keep prodding me about it. With a look on my face that said, 'yeah, I know, I know,' I answered, "My parents are making me doing it."

I knew that would shut them up.

With my dad being the owner of a general hospital that was a bit famous in these parts, people talked about me ever since I started school here, whispering things like, 'Is the girl from that hospital really coming here'? As such, they'd usually stop talking once I brought my parents up. Especially those meek public teachers who'd rather not stir up any trouble.

Hmph, too bad!

From now on, I'm going to some forgotten national school far, far worse off than you are! Hmph. I say to the teacher seated across from me, "The matter's already been settled, and with my grades, I hardly think I'll fail to get into Otonoki, so can we just wrap things up now?"

I guess this kinda got me riled up.



Yeah, still, the school I'd been attending until junior high was pretty popular, at least as far as local schools go, and it went from first to ninth grade. It was a model case, being the only school around that followed the mandatory curriculum all the way up to ninth grade, and rarely enough, the uniforms were pretty cute too, so it got quite a few applicants from all around the ward, even from outside the school district.

In fact, I lived pretty far away too, and rode our car to school.

So, I of course never met Rin or Hanayo during elementary school, and I met Honoka, Eli, and the rest only after I entered Otonokizaka Academy.

Oh, but, since I lived in the area, and Honoka and Umi's families had some local fame, I at least knew that the Homura and the Sonoda Dojo existed.

Since I came from a family of doctors, it seems people thought I came to this school only because I'd flunked out of the private grade schools' tests. But, it didn't take much time for me to show them how wrong they were.

I was the class rep all through elementary school.

Of course, I was also part of the student council from the moment I started middle school.

With a perfect record like that, I'd always, always had confidence that anything I needed on my student record, I could obtain naturally.

"So what's the girl from the Nishikino Hospital doing here?" everyone would wonder from the distance.

Hey, don't ask me. I'd rather be going to some classy private girls' school rather this public school too.

So the problem is...

Where I'd go once I hit the crossroads in my third year.

The Chiyoda ward's had all these public schools for a long time, so there were a lot of cases where parents would send their kids to a local public school, and then pick out a private place for them to start middle school.

I definitely think people expected me to go to some refined private girls' school. Really, I don't think I'm all that cut out for public school myself.

Yet, of all the places, I applied only to Otonoki Academy.

Ugh, even I get lightheaded thinking about it.

I'm sure it gave my classmates something to talk about.

"I heard Nishikino's going to Otonoki"

"What, why!? Did she fail her exams?"

"I guess she's not that smart after all"

Stuff like that, maybe.

Going to Otonoki even though was top of my class on the finals? You'd have to think something happened that I couldn't talk to anyone else about.

I hear the hushed voices coming from the classroom.

They whisper things that they'd never say to my face.

Oh, please, give me a break! It's all Dad's fault, going all, "As the successor to our hospital, you have to go to a local school!" Like, what the heck!? What does that even mean!? I want to ask the same questions you guys do!

♡♡♡♡♡

So, during our last day of swim class before summer break asked me, when the girl who happened to be next to me asked, "Are you really going to Otonoki?"

I was caught completely off-guard.

"Yeah, but only 'cause my dad says I have to," I say, openly and dejectedly.

Maybe I just wanted to say that to someone, just once.

The water splashes around our navy-blue school swimsuits.

The sun shines brightly in the clear sky, as if loudly declaring that July's already half-over. Perhaps that's why I'm in the mood to get this off my back?

Summer break's coming soon.

I won't have to see this irritating eyesore of a school for a while.

But, once she hears my reply...

"Oh, really? That's a surprise!" the girl laughs and says without hesitation. Omine, the one girl in our class who calls me Maki, by name.

Though we're not really good friends or anything, she always talks to me as if it's no big deal, and comes off as a bit of a natural airhead.

It seems she never realized that everyone else in class kept some distance between me and them.

Maybe that's why I ask her a question too, as if it's no big deal,

That's in spite of the fact that I don't care about the affairs of others, and normally don't bother with making conversation.

"What about you, Omine? You've picked a school too, right?"

"I'm not going to Otonoki, but some private girl's school. It was the only one I applied to, and I'm pretty sure I'll get in. My parents made me do it too, so we're kinda in the same boat. Still, I'm kinda jealous, Maki. I wanted to go to Otonoki too."

Huh?|

"Wait... what was that?"

Omine giggles. "I said I wanted to go to Otonoki."

"Huuuh!? By Otonoki, you mean THAT Otonoki, right? Seriously? How come? Why? You haven't mistaken it for some other sch-"

I stop myself, and Omine laughs with genuine amusement.

"Oh, Maki. You should have a bit more pride in your own school, hehe."

Though her gentle, round face, framed with light, medium-length hair is always brimming with energy, she has a characteristic relaxed way of speaking.

She radiates an aura of innocence, one that couldn't possibly hide any hint of malice behind it. That's Omine.

"Well, you've never seen me on the way to school because you ride your car, but I come here from Ogawa. I've even been to your hospital before."

"O- ohhh, that's why you'd want to go to Otonoki. Y-yeah, I mean, it is p-p-p-pretty close, right!?"

Not wanting to hear her talk about our hospital anymore, I raise my voice and try to change the subject. Was that too obvious? I guess I failed. Still, she doesn't seem to take any notice of it.

"Yep. In fact, I was supposed to go to Otonoki elementary, too, but my parents decided to make me take the test, and I somehow got into this place."

Omine laughs with a "teeheehee", and causing her surprisingly large bust to bounce.

Even though we're in our school swimsuits. And she's still only in 9th grade.

That's... kinda impressive.

Taking notice of my gaze, Omine gently places her hand on my chest.

She laughs, saying I still have a way to go, and starts to tell me exactly why she wanted to go to Otonoki.

How she never had any friends near home, since she went to school so far away. How jealous she felt watching the kids from Otonoki elementary going to the festivals and Bon-Odori together. How lonely she felt being unable to hang out after school with anyone since we all came from so far away. How she felt like she kinda didn't belong here, because even though she liked everyone here, everyone was too competitive...

But, when she talked to her parents about it, they were opposed to the idea, saying that hardly anyone went to local high schools, and she'd actually be missing out on a lot of chances to make friends unless she chose a school she could go to by train.

Well, that's true enough. They do have a point.

You never hear of people walking to high school, normally.

I give a deep nod, and she laughs.

"Yeah, I never even noticed. Silly me!"

And so, my shirt friendship with Omine took its first steps.

"I'd always wanted to talk a bit about home with you~"

The smile she flashes at me as she talks is so bright I can't bear to look back.



That day, as I went home carrying my wet swimsuit in my pool bag,

I made an excuse and got off the car early, on the way from Kudan to Yasukuni,

Walking through the streets, I found that, true enough, more skyscrapers had sprung up since I'd last been here.

Not that I'd noticed until Omine brought it up.

"That place moves so fast, it'll leave me behind if I don't go back soon", she'd said. Left behind? By that sleepy little town, filled with old folks, caught between the business districts? The one where you can hardly even feel the flow of time?

That's what I'd thought when I heard her. But now, I can see she was right.

As I walk from Yasukuni, passing the streets of Suda, filled with old early-Showa buildings, crossing the Shohei Bridge and proceeding into Akihabara, I can see the difference.

From Showa to Heisei, and then into the 21st century, with all the foreign-language signage filling Akihabara. In just thirty minutes of walking, it feels like I've accelerated 100 years through time.

Now that I think about it, though Akihabara stands out with its blaring announcements all about the station, its neighboring Ocha-no-mizu and Ogawa have changed a lot too.

I mean, I'm kinda used to it now, but they got rid of the park in front of my house and now the place is packed with shiny black buildings you have to crane your neck to look at, and the famous old bookstore in Ocha-no-mizu's closed up too. The famous cafes around have been disappearing one-by-one too, and that fruit parlor my mom used to take me to all the time closed a few years back too.

Aw, and I loved their pancakes and melon juice, too!

And afterwards, of course, came the big chain shops, cafes, bars, and convenience stores. Not that there's anything wrong with chain stores, and convenience stores have come in handy for me a lot, too, but...

But still... though I'm not Honoka, it's kinda saddening that all of these family businesses have to go in exchange for that. We're a bit of a bigger operation, but the Nishikino General Hospital's a family-run business too.

It's getting harder to find stores where people will greet me, "Hello, welcome back, Maki," when I walk through the door.

Although in Suda, where Honoka lives, there's still a bunch of old stores going strong, the city changes so much if you walk just a few blocks away.

As I realize this, I sigh softly.

It start to get short of breath.

I feel like I'm standing alone, in the middle of a large, fast-flowing river. I'm sure Omine realized it a long time ago, and now thanks to her, I've realized it too.

Though it more slowly in some places, and gets a bit deeper in others, this broad river continues to flow and change.

And where will that river take us?

Will it take us out to sea, where stormy days await?

Will that happen to this town?

Either way, I've never paid any mind to it in my life.

I mean, it's been like this since I was born. This situation's been so natural to me, I've never thought of questioning it.

Kids live in a small world. The city I live in is the entire known world to me, so it's totally normal for me to be like this, right? I'm sure that's one thing that sets apart people who come from old, established families, like Honoka and Umi. Sometimes, I think about how they've always had their tradition to bear ever since they were kids.

They're just on a bit of a different time scale. They've got the stores and dojos their parents and grandparents ran on top of the some-teen years they've lived.

That's all I have right now, but to those girls, the "present" is just a tiny bit of the history that they're a part of.

Though our hospital's a bit famous around these parts, I'm different from them. I just happened to have a doctor for a dad.

Now that I think about it, Omine's kind of like Honoka in a way, with her light, medium-length hair always bouncing with energy, her soft, drooping eyes that close up when she smiles, her fluttery, relaxed way of speaking,



and her bottomless reserves of energy, and the way her smile makes you want to smile too whenever you see it.

And, the way she loved Otonoki.

Omine was so innocent, so carefree, that it seemed like she was hardly ever thinking. It seems her grades weren't exactly high, and she never really stood out against the rest of our class. She was just always smiling, a bit clumsy-looking, and uncaring of others' strengths or faults. Yeah, she'd have to be a bit socially awkward to approach me while everyone else "respectfully kept their distance".

I'd actually said to her once, "If you hang out with me, people are gonna start looking at you funny, you know?"

Back then, it took everything out of me to say that. Right, that was the most hospitality I could muster. Of course, I didn't want to say that. But, I didn't want everyone to shun her because of me.

That's why... But, it seems I never needed to worry about that. She was the sort of girl anyone could like, and even as she spent more time with me, the class's attitude toward her never changed. In fact, I was the one who started to fit in with the rest of the class more, all because she was with me.

There's a picture of us at our fall culture festival that I still have.

Our class was running a quiz show. I'm smiling with a hint of excitement, and next to me is Omine, quietly laughing as always. She both seems like she's not all there, and anyone could tell what she cared about, even if she didn't tell anyone.

Like a limber creature of the wild, beautiful and alone on the grasslands.

Like someone who alone held what mattered to her.

Now that I think about it, she might have been my first true friend.

The friend I'd given up on finding, someone I could open up to. I'd come to admire her strength and cheerfulness, without even knowing it.

♡♡♡♡♡

"So this is where we part ways, huh?"

"Yep..."

Again, she speaks so cheerily I can't look at her straight-on.

Standing together in the shrine's main sanctuary, I face forward with my eyes closed and pretend to pray.

March, at the Yushima Tenjin shrine, was the last time I saw her.

It was a blindingly sunny day, though some remnants of an unseasonal snowstorm were still scattered here and there.

She'd invited me to come buy amulets together here before our tests, and the day after our graduation, she'd called to ask me to come pray with her.

I had nothing else on my spring break schedule, so I left the house, muttering to myself that it was only to be expected for someone just graduating junior high.

A bit far away, but still in walking distance, the Yushima Tenjin shrine's known nationwide for housing the god of learning, so chances are, every kid around here's paid him a visit at least once. He's big to the point that they hand out their blessed pencils that guarantee success on tests at the nearby schools, and to be honest, I'm kinda of it all. But, when it's time for a big exam, you just can't help but stop by... maybe that's what it means to be a local?

I'm not the type to rely on the gods to solve my problems, but if Omine wants me to go, I don't really have a reason to say no. Plus, we both got into our schools, so I guess we did have his favor. So, we've gotta go offer him a prayer, right? Well, that was the excuse I made for myself as I went.

"I'm still jealous that you're going to Otonoki."



I get cross at her persistence.

"Yeah, well, I could say the same to you. I'd rather go to a fancy boarding school like yours than plain old Otonokizaka Academy."

Omine giggles, "Mmm, that would be a better fit for you, wouldn't it? Then how about we trade? You and I can switch places for some proxy test-taking... I mean, proxy-enrollment! How about it? Just don't tell our parents and I'm sure nobody will catch on."

With Omine, it's hard to tell whether she's joking or serious.

"Yeah, right. How about you stop crying over spilt milk? You're going to the fancy private school of my dreams, so you'd better have the time of your life there, alright? I'm sure you'll make a ton of friends in no time, and you'll love it there, even if it's far from home." I say without turning to look at her.

Omine's gradually begins to talk softer and softer, "I guess there wouldn't be a point in switching places anyway, since we'd still be going to different schools." Her voice drops to a whisper.

"Something wrong, Omine?"

I turn to look at her... and she's crying.

"Maki, I really wanted to go to school with you. I wanted to go to Otonoki with you..."

Omine cries without any noise, her throat trembling silently. It's the first time I've seen her like this. With her eyes closed, it almost looks like she's laughing.

"Omine..." I say, but I stop myself.

Omine presses her face against my shoulder.

I can feel the heat of her tears, soaking through my coat.

"So I'm still just Omine to you, even to the end, aren't I?" she laughs, with her face still against my shoulder.

"That's just like you, Maki," she adds, but still without moving. In the end, we stay like that for a long time.

I wasn't sure what to do,

So, I just stood there.

In reality, the fact that I'd couldn't be with Omine anymore was hardest on me.

It was the first time I'd ever felt so ashamed of myself for being unable to be honest with my feelings.

I couldn't tell the person I treasured how much I treasured her.

My childish self back then couldn't even realize I'd treasured the person I treasured.

♡♡♡♡♡

Maybe, deep inside, I've always been waiting, ever since that day.

For a new encounter.

For the day I'd meet people I could truly call my friends, after thinking for so long that I'd never be able to find someone like myself.

This time, I want to tell them what I was unable to tell Omine.

It's thanks to Otonoki that I've got this chance to grow past the child I've been.

I want to be able to say what's really on my mind.

For the rest of μ 's,

and for my friends.

Though, with the way I instinctively look down on everything else, that's quite a challenge.

But, now that I'm in μ 's, surrounded by all these girls as direct as bamboo shoots stretching for the sky, maybe you could say that I'm changing too?



After that day, Omine moved into the dorms at her new school, and I haven't seen her since.

But, I do write to her every now and then.

So, am I living the Otonoki life that Omine wanted?

Scatterbrained and full of weird ideas she may be, but I'll be she never thought I'd become a school idol. But, I think she'd really dig it. Though, if she were here, I'm sure we'd have ten members instead of nine.

And as for her... is she living a life that'd make me green with envy at her fancy school?

I'm sure I don't have to worry. Omine's gonna naturally make friends with everyone around her, I know it.

Though our fates have split, the path I walk has taken me to my precious companions. My precious friends.

And to something that I love more than anything else, although maybe I haven't accepted that quite yet.

I can tell that the seed Omine planted has sprouted inside me.

The wish to directly say that I love the things, and the people who are precious to me.

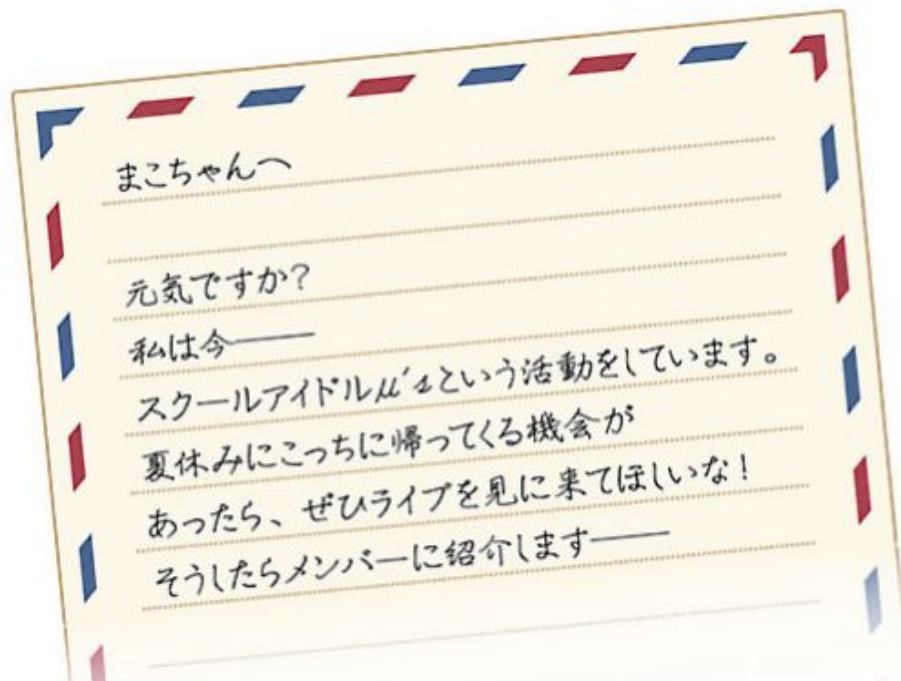
I love you forever and ever.

And to the other members of μ 's reading this, too.

You've all made me so happy.

To have such earnest friends like you all with me has made my lonesome, dishonest self so happy.

I'll keep on doing everything I can for μ 's.



Dear Mako,

How have you been?

Right now...

I'm working as part of the school idol group μ 's.

If you get the chance to come back over summer break, be sure to come watch one of our live concerts!

I'll introduce you to all of our members-

Comments♥Eli

Maki may seem skilled at everything, but she's actually surprisingly clumsy. She acts like she gives everything a sidelong glance, but she's really straight and direct like none other. The thought of truly deceiving others never even crosses her mind. She's the sort to be honest to a fault. But, that's what I love about Maki! I'm sure the rest of μ's feels the same way. And to our beloved Maki, we hope you'll continue to shine by our side for all time.

